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Working Lands Alliance Policy Statement Education Committee *Support for H.B. 6842* Public Hearing March 8, 2023

Dear Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, and Connecticut General Assembly members of the Education Committee:

The Working Lands Alliance appreciates the opportunity to submit testimony *in support* of H.B. 6842- An Act Concerning the Establishment of a Local Food for Schools Incentive Program and Expansion of the CT Grown for CT Kids Grant Program.

My name is Robin Kerber, and I am American Farmland Trust's New England Policy Associate. In Connecticut, I am also the Policy Associate for the Working Lands Alliance. WLA is a broad-based, statewide coalition dedicated to preserving the state's farmland. WLA includes farmers and such organizations as Connecticut Farmland Trust, New Connecticut Farmer Alliance, City of New Haven Food Policy Division, Connecticut Land Conservation Council, and the Connecticut Farm Bureau Association, among many others. As an Alliance, we care deeply about saving the state's working farmland and ensuring a healthy agricultural sector and prosperous future for Connecticut's farmers.

Before joining American Farmland Trust, I served as the Farm and Sea to School Coordinator with the Maine Department of Education (DOE) and on the Leadership Committee of the Maine Farm to School Network. My work supported schools and producers and was vital in shaping historical policy, including the bills that provide reliable funding for school meals at no cost (School Meals for All, [LD 1679](#)) and a local foods incentive program (The Local Foods Fund, [LD 636](#)). My position at the DOE was created during the passing of the Local Foods Fund bill and is very similar to that being proposed in Sec. 2 of H.B. 6842. In my past job, I managed the Local Foods Fund, an incentive program with strong similarities to the proposed Local Food for Schools Incentive Program outlined in this bill. The position outlined in Sec. 2 shares much of the same responsibilities that I carried, and I strongly believe that it is critical to have someone administering, managing, and advancing these programs across the state. In addition, having someone provide direct technical support to school nutrition staff and farmers is vital to the success of farm to school programs.

Farm to School programs support Connecticut farmers, producers, and fishermen and improve the quality of school meals by bringing healthy, fresh, and less-processed food to Connecticut children. Funding to support these programs offers an incredible return on investment in quantity and quality. Children win through increased access to healthy, local food; farmers win through establishing new relationships within their



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community; and Connecticut wins by keeping a higher percentage of dollars re-invested in the local economy. In addition, farm to School programs have the potential to shape the impact of schools by increasing access to healthy food, strengthening local food systems, and creating a culture of wellness and equity.

Creating a Farm to School Incentive Program

Two of the most significant barriers to local procurement in school meals are the often-higher price tag of local food and the increased labor demands to process these foods. Products from farmers are often raw, unprocessed, or minimally processed and received into school kitchens that are chronically under-resourced, underfunded, and short-staffed. In addition, kitchen equipment to help process local foods and opportunities to expand skills and professional development still need to be improved. The position created in H.B. 6842 will support the development of culinary skills and kitchen efficiencies, investing time, energy, and resources directly into school kitchens. It is imperative to ensure that Connecticut school nutrition staff feel supported and see the value and opportunities that local food gives them rather than an increased demand in their kitchens. The bill also encourages grant funds to be used for kitchen equipment, recognizing that many school nutrition programs cannot take on the extra burden of processing raw food if they do not have the tools and equipment to do so.

The School Nutrition Association's [2023 School Nutrition Trends Report](#) showed that 99.8% of school food authorities (SFAs) cited the increased cost of food as the top challenge for their school meal programs. Followed closely by labor and product shortages, we know that SFAs are up against many barriers to success. Implementing Farm to School opportunities is a voluntary choice that Connecticut schools are not obligated to participate in. But we know these programs bring fundamental value to children and farmers, strengthen connections in the state's food economy, and promote positive relationships between Connecticut farmers and the community they feed. The last [USDA Farm to School Census](#) in 2019 showed that 86% of surveyed Connecticut SFAs participated in Farm to School compared to the national number of 65.4%. With programs like those outlined in H.B. 6842, we can support even more schools in their efforts to offer local nutritional options.

A hungry child cannot learn, and many students rely on year-round school meal programs to keep them nourished and establish their foundation of healthy eating habits and preferences. A critical component in encouraging children to eat school meals is improving the quality of the items on their trays. Connecticut producers are growing, raising, and harvesting various foods. School meals help children meet their nutritional needs and can expose them to new flavors and foods. There is also an opportunity to bring culturally appropriate meals to student trays, encouraging respect and appreciation for the diversity of Connecticut children and their dietary needs. Decreasing the barriers in local procurement results in a higher percentage of dollars being reinvested into the Connecticut economy. Relationships between school buyers and farmers mean that money supports local communities. During my Farm to School



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work in Maine, I saw firsthand how the impact of secured funding is vital in establishing successful Farm to School programs. Investing in these programs means investing in the long-term health of both Connecticut children and Connecticut's agricultural industry and community. The Grant Programs outlined in this act provide the opportunity to strengthen connections between children, schools, and farmers.

CT Grown for CT Kids Grant Program

The CT Grown for CT Kids bill passed in 2021 and has seen significant interest from farm to school advocates around the state. In its first year, 59 applicants asked for \$962,000 in funding. With the program's initial budget of \$250,000, the Connecticut Department of Agriculture made 13 project awards. The current school year's round of grants saw double the number of grantees awarded compared to 2022, with [\\$452,268 allotted](#) to 32 school districts, farmers, childcare providers, non-profit organizations, and local businesses committed to building a robust Farm to School program in Connecticut. While this is a significant increase from the prior years, there were 72 applications totaling \$1,022,285 worth of projects. There is a clear growing interest in and a need for secure funding for this program.

School nutrition programs are, to put it one way, "the largest restaurant in town." They are tasked to feed the future of our country, and programs like CT Grown for CT Kids can potentially enrich the lives of Connecticut school children and producers. In addition, these grants inject much-needed funding into invaluable Farm to School programs across the state. The CT Grown for CT Kids grant program is a win-win for Connecticut children and producers.

The CT Grown for CT Kids Grant Program and the Local Food for Schools Incentive Program supports communities across the state, especially those with high rates of food insecurity, by providing healthy, affordable, and nutritious food from local agricultural producers. This critical investment will also create market expansion and diversification opportunities for producers looking to keep the food they grow in their community.

On behalf of the Working Lands Alliance, I thank the Committee for the opportunity to testify in support of H.B. 6842. We appreciate all that you have done, both in helping to ensure Connecticut agriculture remains viable and in investing in school nutrition programs deliberately and voluntarily looking to support their local farming community.

If you have any questions about farm to school programs, please feel free to reach out to me at rkerber@farmland.org

With sincere regards,
Robin Kerber
Working Lands Alliance